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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 001099

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SUBJECT: FRIENDS OF BELARUS OFFER MIXED VIEWS ON ENGAGEMENT

Classified By: POLMINCOUNS LAURENCE WOLHERS FOR REASONS 1.5(D) and (E).

SUMMARY

11. (C) On March 21, DAS David Kramer and U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Karen Stewart participated in a Friends of Belarus meeting convened at the Lithuanian Permanent Mission to the EU, in Brussels. The meeting was held on the margin of EU capital-based COEST experts meeting and US-EU COEST Troika meeting in Brussels (septel). The meeting helped bring out more vocal skepticism to the Council's forward-leaning approach in Minsk than had been expressed at a PSC meeting on the subject the previous week. A number of EU member states either expressed concern (Lithuania, UK, France, Sweden), or outright skepticism (Poland) about the Council Secretariat and German Presidency's aggressive engagement strategy for Belarus. Delegations also concurred with the U.S. assessment that Lukashenko was under unprecedented pressure from all sides and that his overtures to the West could merely be a tactical response to Russian pressure. There was broad agreement on support for civil society, second tier of the government, political opposition, NGOs, independent media and flow of information (including more broadcasting and people to people exchanges). Highlighting the need for continued strong US-EU cooperation, DAS Kramer won support for regular Friends meetings in the future. The German Presidency also undertook to consider DAS Kramer's suggestion that the U.S. and EU consider language on Belarus for inclusion in the US-EU April 30 Summit Declaration. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Lithuanians circulated a non-paper (USEU e-mailed to EUR/ERA for Deputy Rob Faucher).
END SUMMARY

Participation

12. (SBU) Ambassador Rytis Martikonis, Lithuanian Permanent Representative to the EU hosted the Friends of Belarus meeting at the Lithuanian Permrep. The discussion was led by Mr. Arunas Vinciunas, Director of the Eastern Europe and Central Asian Department of the Lithuanian MFA. The United States was represented by David Kramer, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European Affairs, Ambassador to Belarus Karen

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Stewart and poloff notetaker. The Germany EU Presidency (and current COEST Chair) was represented by Hans-Dieter Lucas, Director for Eastern and Central European Affairs, German MFA and Peter Sonnehof, Belarus Desk Officer, MFA. Other capital-based participants included Ms. Aurelia Buchez, Deputy Director of Eurasian Affairs, Directorate for Continental European Affairs, French MFA and Mr. Wojciech Zajackowski, Director of Eastern Policy Department, Polish MFA. Sweden and the UK were represented by Brussels-based experts. Helga Schmid, Deputy Dirgen for Strategic Policy Planning, and Pirkka Tapiola, Advisor to the High Rep for CIS

countries represented the Council Secretariat. Commission official Hugues Mingarelli was invited, but did not attend the event.

Council/Commission Trip Readout

13. (C) In an overview of her March 4-5 visit to Minsk, Council Secretariat Director of Strategic Policy Planning Helga Schmid sought to highlight that her purpose was to determine the seriousness of Belarus' opening to the EU against a backdrop of increasing Russian pressure on Lukashenko. She asserted that she had made clear to GOB officials that it was up to Belarus to take the first step before serious "negotiation" with the EU could begin. In this regard, she stressed that the EU had to simultaneously prepare itself for (reciprocal) action. According to Schmid, the opposition in Minsk, with whom she met during the visit, supported an EU "double track, step-by-step" approach that contained three elements: continued pressure on the regime; outreach and support for the Belarusian people and opposition; and willingness to engage with the authorities if they signaled seriousness of intent. The March 25 protest outcome was an important test of GOB intentions. The recent arrest of opposition leader Vyachorka had been a "slap in the face" to the EU. The EU had responded by postponing a EU-Belarus technical energy dialogue scheduled for March.

EU Reactions Varied

14. (C) Hans-Dieter Lucas, the German Presidency representative, strongly supported the Council's initiative to engage, noting that "doing nothing was not an option for us." Reaction from other EU members was far from enthusiastic -- ranging from skepticism (UK, France, and Lithuania), opposition (Poland) or tepid support (Sweden).

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France sounded a note of caution in agreeing to a double-track approach and underscored the need for balance between engagement by the EU and concrete actions by the GOB.

Poland dismissed the utility of the "step-by-step" or "benchmark" approach, arguing that it had been tried in the past and hadn't worked. The UK expressed "considerable skepticism" and echoed French wariness about possible "fake" moves by the GOB. The UK rep also insisted that a sustainable and irreversible "jump" and not a "step" by the GOB to prove its sincerity was required before the EU could begin engagement. Lithuanian Ambassador Martikonis noted that the Vyachorka arrest had demonstrated that the Belarusian security apparatus and MFA were not coordinating their actions and policy. This misstep had called into doubt the Belarusian MFA's ability to deliver in a political negotiation with the EU.

15. (C) The Polish MFA rep stated that the crucial question before any engagement revolved around any radical change or orientation in Luka's policy or his country's place in Europe. For its part, Poland thought the answer was "no" as evidenced by Luka's greater interest in Belarus -- asking Russia was on track for our policy would not -- leverage EU visitation office in Minsk.

Limited prisoner releases not enough

17. (C) DAS Kramer noted that while the US would certainly not reject prisoners, this action would not be sufficient to change US policy, including a easing of the visa ban or asset freeze.

The GOB needed to satisfy our demand to release all political prisoners, including Aleksandr Kozyulin. Furthermore, the EU should not give the Belarusian authorities "credit" for the release of three political prisoners who were set to conclude their prison sentences by this July. Martikonis noted that names could not be removed from EU visa ban list "on principle." Ambassador Stewart

briefed other participants on rising intimidation and attacks by the Belarusian security apparatus on youth.

U.S.-EU Summit Language

18. (C) DAS Kramer highlighted the value of US-EU cooperation on Belarus. He reiterated U.S. support for the EU's Shadow Action Plan and Schmid's trip as a way to demonstrate to Belarusian's that there was light at the end of the tunnel - if they first took the necessary steps. He also noted that the US-EU summit could provide an opportunity to stress our solidarity with the Belarusian people and asked others to explore this possibility. On the margin of the meeting, German MFA expert asked USEU to provide USG elements, noting that Germany could be open to such language especially if it was positive and forward looking in tone.

19. DAS Kramer and Ambassador Stewart have cleared this message.
GRAY
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